Education as Instrument or as Empowerment?

Untangling White Privilege in the Politics of Ethnic Studies: The Case of the Tucson Unified School District

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Introduction

One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding.

> —Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Many of my undergraduate students enter higher education expecting to learn all the answers to life's big questions, and they are often surprised to hear me declare that with one exception there are no absolutes. The single exception, I half-jokingly avow, is that schooling and public education are ubiquitously political phenomena that are indelibly messy and fraught with conflict. The fact that schooling is a public institution compels its having to endure and mediate political disputes among a number of competing interests.

Public school curriculum battles offer great examples for illustrating how politics saturates education policy, particularly if you focus your attention on the State of Texas. I can annually count on the Texas Board of Education to provide me with relevant and laconic (not to mention, often absurd) examples of curricular politics. However, Arizona has emerged as another peculiar contender in contemporary battles to control high school curricula.

Curriculum battles have deep historical roots in Arizona and elsewhere that go beyond the scope of this discussion, and for brevity's sake, my focus will be on Tucson's recent and controversial ethnic studies program.

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Brief Historical Context

Twenty years after Brown v. Board of Education, Hispanic and African-American students filed a class action suit against the Tucson Unified School District for its long-standing de jure segregation. Four years later, in 1978, the federal court exercising jurisdiction over the case agreed with the plaintiffs and approved a desegregation plan intended to remedy decades of segregation. Like most desegregation plans implemented during the second half of the twentieth century, Tucson's plan proved sufficiently malleable to allow the White power structure to weaken and circumvent its objectives, resulting in what James E. Ryan refers to as "token compliance" (Ryan, 2010, p. 23).

In 2004, the federal district court *sua sponte* (upon its own prompting) urged the district to consider requesting the Court for relief from continued oversight. The school district seized the opportunity, and despite objections raised by several affected groups, the Court subsequently declared the district to be unitary, a status achieved when school districts have satisfactorily remedied their former dual systems of racial segregation.

The district court's action in this case was not only atypical since requests for relief usually emanate from school districts, but also because the Court's decision was contrary to its own findings of fact. Despite its legal decision, in other words, the district court declared, "The school district did not have a history of good faith compliance with the original [desegregation] settlement," nor did the Court's ruling adhere to the various expectations identified by other applicable Supreme Court decisions ("Fourteenth Amendment—School Desegregation," 2012, p. 1533).

Although the Court concluded that the school district failed to put forward a reasonable effort to desegregate its schools, the Court demonstrated that it was willing to replace its former desegregation order with a more docile approach that included evoking a sense of accountability among policymakers in the school district toward their constituents. Why the judge suddenly assumed the school district would voluntarily move toward actual unitary status without judicial oversight is unclear.

Nevertheless, the Mexican-American Studies Program was recommended as a means to achieve this accountability. Decades of unsuccessful judicial oversight was replaced by introducing a culturally relevant curriculum in the Tucson schools. Therefore, the school district never reached a genuine unitary status and segregated schools remain intact as a result of historical de jure and de facto segregation.

Cultural Connections

The Mexican-American Studies Program in short taught cultural pride, and it has been extremely successful in raising the academic achievement of students in Tucson's segregated schools. Notwithstanding success and despite its serving as a replacement for deeper institutional remedies, the White power structure in Tucson began attacking the program as un-American and, ironically, racist. After realizing success by circumventing the integration of Tucson's public schools, critics then focused on dismantling a culturally relevant indigenous curriculum.

The ethnic studies program has been misunderstood, erroneously described, and inappropriately criticized by politicians, policymakers, and the media. More importantly, what often gets lost in the cacophony is the academic success of the program. According to Jeff Biggers, who has written extensively on this issue, "No other high school program has continually been vindicated by documented studies for its undeniable success in alleviating the achievement gap, graduating college-bound students, and inspiring community-engaged youth" (Biggers, 2012).

Personal Perspective

The reaction among mostly White public officials and policymakers is vexing, particularly since they fail to comprehend the importance of and success achieved by educating students within their cultural frames of reference. The curriculum is tailored to the cultural backgrounds of nearly all of the students in the school district whose ancestors have lived in the region for thousands of years, long before American colonization of the area and its schools. The relentless effort to remove Mexican-American studies from the schools illustrates enduring examples of cultural and curricular imperialism.

Lorenzo Lopez, a Mexican-American studies teacher in the Tucson school district celebrates this curriculum: "It validate[s] the struggle of folks who were just like me, the immigrant story." Lopez's introduction to a similar course in college, which spurred his interest in higher education, "changed everything," he said.

Many of us are not surprised to hear of Lopez's estrangement from the traditional mainstream curriculum prior to enrolling in his college Chicano literature class. Previously he

. . . felt alienated by what he was being taught because he couldn't see his own reflection in [conventional] classes. The Chicano literature brought it all in focus and made him feel like he had a part in the story that is America.

Not only did this course "change everything" about how Lopez viewed formal education, it prompted his subsequent resolve in teaching Mexican-American studies in Tucson. (Letson, 2012)

The Mexican-American studies curriculum incorporated a variety of materials and texts including, but not limited to, a lesson plan entitled "From Cortes to Bush: 500 Years of Internalized Oppression," as well as the following texts: Chicano! The History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement by F. Arturo Rosales, Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire, Occupied America: A History of Chicanos by Rodolfo F. Acuña, 500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures by Elizabeth Martinez, Rethinking Columbus: The Next Five Hundred Years by Bill Bigelow, Critical Race Theory by Richard Delgado, Message to Aztlán: Selected Writings of Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzalez by Rodolfo Gonzales, and William Shakespeare's The Tempest.

The school district banned seven of these texts and one, *Mexican White Boy*, was restricted to leisure use only. The materials and books provide not only culturally relevant material, but also critical analyses of Mexican-American and U.S. history, politics, power, inequality, and civil rights struggles, which serve as focal points of contention in a school system where powerful Whites have advocated an uncritical, assimilationist curriculum that perpetuates many myths favorable to the dominant culture.

This impartial list of texts serves to foster a culturally responsive pedagogy imparted within a social justice framework. This model encompasses "a counter-hegemonic curriculum and a pedagogy based on the theories of Paulo Freire," according to the ethnic studies program website (Fish, 2010).

Freire was a Brazilian educator and author of the widely influential book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire has been condemned by a number of politicians and policymakers critical of the former Tucson ethnic studies curriculum. They often cite selected references by Freire to Marx and Engels, Lenin, Beauvoir, and Mao, among others, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, illustrating both a misunderstanding by these critics and the likelihood that they have never read Freire's work, which is fundamentally based on deep critical thinking, social justice, and augmenting greater possibilities for peace.

Stanley Fish explains this aptly when he asserts,

Freire argues that the structures of domination and oppression in a society are at their successful worst when the assumptions and ways of thinking that underwrite their tyranny have been internalized by their victims: "The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped." If the ideas and values of the oppressor are all you ever hear, they will be yours—that is what hegemony means—and it will take a special and radical effort to liberate yourself from them.

That effort is education, properly reconceived not as the delivery of pre-packaged knowledge to passive students, but as the active dismantling, by teachers and students together, of the world view that sustains the powers that be and insulates them from deep challenge. Only when this is done, says Freire, will students cease to "adapt to the word as it is" and become 'transformers of that world.'

To say that this view of education is political is to understate the point, although that descriptive will not be heard by its adherents as a criticism. The Social Justice Education Project means what its title says: students are to be brought to see what the prevailing orthodoxy labors to occlude so that they can join the effort

to topple it. To this end the Department of Mexican American Studies (I quote again from its Web site) pledges to "work toward the invoking of a critical consciousness within each and every student" and "promote and advocate for social and educational transformation." (Fish, 2010)

Cultural and Curricular Imperialism

Tom Horne, Arizona's former State Superintendent of Education, and John Huppenthal, the current Superintendent and former state senator and chair of that chamber's education committee, have obstinately criticized the Mexican-American studies curriculum for several years. In 2007, both individuals spearheaded ending the ethnic studies program, with Horne averring the idea that students "should be taught to treat each other as individuals" rather than "what race they happened to have been born into," which "is irrelevant" (Horne, 2010). Horne adamantly promoted his opinions on a number of occasions and through a variety of media. Horne's comments present us with two important problems that he fails to recognize, and this is particularly troubling since he was responsible for overseeing Arizona's public schools. This curriculum battle presents us with two very different expectations and objectives for public schooling.

Horne and Huppenthal envision a traditional educational system whose primary purpose serves to assimilate many diverse groups into an amalgamation of what it means to be an "American," and being an American in this context portends adopting uncritically dominant cultural values accentuated by White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant beliefs. Teaching students as individuals-by failing to recognize and engage their cultural backgrounds in the educational process—signifies what Horne and others are really insinuating: namely, that teachers and schools should be colorblind to race, ethnicity, and cultural differences.

In other words, what Horne is suggesting is that students should be taught to think and act like Horne, to personify only his views and cultural attentiveness, and for immigrants concomitantly to discard all vestiges of their native cultures. Horne, Huppenthal, and others involved in the ban against ethnic studies fail to see themselves as an ethnic group. Their ethnic and cultural identities have rarely, if ever, been questioned by the dominant culture and its institutions, including public schools and public school curricula. Therefore, they

view themselves not as members of an ethnic group, but as community exemplars that are undefined and unaffected by their ethnic and racial backgrounds. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As members of the dominant culture, I expect that they rarely if ever experienced or experience cultural dissonance, rejection, alienation, or ignominy due to the color of their skin, their language and religious beliefs, or their social practices and ideas. They operate within a cultural milieu that confirms and validates their self-identities. Unlike the social (and legal) construction of minorities, Whites rarely if ever have to confront harmful stereotypes, discrimination, and prejudice, whether face-to-face or institutionally in the media, the schools, or in political, social, and economic systems.

By not having to experience, negotiate, and endure these difficulties, Horne may, like so many Whites, think of himself as race-less or shorn of ethnic and linguistic distinctiveness; that his self-identity, his success, and his relational existence is in no way tangled up in his being White. Lacking this frame of reference, perhaps it is easy for Horne to conclude that his life's journey has been shaped solely by his own individual hard work and his own individual merit. He is free from the burden of having to negotiate his Whiteness within a cultural ethos that has consistently bolstered and rewarded, symbolically and overtly, his identity and status.

Horne has perhaps never had to consciously negotiate, mediate, or juxtapose his failures and successes with his skin color, his language, his sexual orientation, his gender, or his religious beliefs. His being socially constructed as White provides him with symbolic and tangible rewards that non-Whites are often denied. It is easy for people like Horne to proudly proclaim that everyone should be treated in a race- or ethnically-neutral way since his self-identity is uninterrupted or incontrovertible by his being White. For this reason, he easily views himself, not as a White person, but as an individual empty of ethnic resonance, an "American," who need pay no attention to such frivolities.

Erroneously, Horne does not see his being White as having anything to do with his success or his ability to navigate through the labyrinth of social relations and practices that non-Whites often struggle with every day. This kind of privilege is not necessarily connected to wealth and material success, although they often correspond. Rather, privilege in this sense refers to the

benefits incurred, whether implicitly or explicitly, symbolically or literally, by being a member of the dominant culture. Privilege consists in the ability to capitalize on these benefits and having the capacity to avoid problems experienced by non-Whites in society.

Peggy McIntosh refers to White privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets," for example, that most members of the dominant culture are "oblivious" to (Wildman & Davis, 1996, p. 17; Tatum, 2003, p. 8). These "unearned assets" may result from minor day-to-day experiences or they may include more subtle and often hidden, but highly advantageous institutional rewards and benefits.

These "unearned assets" accumulate to form a degree of power that non-Whites in society are often denied. My guess is that Horne, rather than referring to any privilege he may have enjoyed as a White male may, if asked, conclude that his professional, financial, and social successes had nothing to do with the color of his skin, but rather, was a result of his hard work ethic, his decision to attend college and graduate school, and his making virtuous choices along life's journey. Moreover, while he undoubtedly worked hard and made successful decisions, this conclusion would be incomplete if he fails to notice how his journey was made less difficult by his being a member of the dominant culture and his enjoying greater access to and deriving benefits from society's institutional structures.

Horne, as many other Whites, fails to recognize the concept of individualism as a cultural or social construction. Rather, they appear to view individualism as an ideal that transcends culture. He may fail to see the term as one of a number of culturally acquired ingredients that define, structure, and support his self-identity. There is nothing wrong with individuality. In fact, it should also be encouraged, but what Horne and others are doing in this ethnic studies debate is chiseling out a dual or oppositional identity between members of the dominant culture and others by rendering individuality and group solidarity as antagonistic polar opposites.

Horne fails to understand that he too is a member of an ethnic group, but his ethnicity has been so absorbed by society's institutions that he is unable to view the concept as distinctly ethnic or culturally acquired. Individualism often serves as an ethnic-less and culturally absent veneer to members of the dominant group. Whites can gaze into the sycophantic "Looking"

Glass" and probably wonder why they are being questioned with regard to their palpable and unambiguous preconceived notions and intuitive cultural assumptions. Criticisms of ethnic studies or multicultural curricula tend to result from (often unconsciously) perceived threats to power, a questioning of or revision to the given status quo, and for people like Horne and Huppenthal schooling unwittingly serves as an instrument of assimilation or cultural imperialism for ethnic minorities, as opposed to an opportunity for empowerment.

The introduction of diverse cultures in the curriculum and the perspectives that they bring to classroom learning and discourse appear to them as personal censure or condemnation. Ethnic studies programs are viewed by critics, perhaps, as questioning what they consider a cultural apotheosis. But for ethnic studies supporters, these programs represent emancipation from an inadequate and stultifying worldview.

In conclusion, the ethnic studies program in Tucson should not only be maintained; its academic success story should be celebrated. As Paulo Freire concluded in *We Make the Road by Walking*,

The teacher is...an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves. (Horton & Freire, 1991)

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